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ABSTRACT

To most effectively meet the needs of young primary-grade children for whom English is not the home language, teachers must come to understand each child's family culture, how the family transmits that culture to the child, and cultural and familial expectations for the child behaviorally and academically. The best source for this information is the parents themselves. The primary goal of this study was to examine the nature of the relationship between American teachers and Korean parents, particularly in terms of effectiveness of communication and cultural sensitivity in exchanging information. Extensive interviews were conducted with four teachers and five Korean mothers about their perceptions and concerns, best methods of communicating, and expectations about the roles of teachers and parents. From what was learned, suggestions were made to facilitate relationships between American teachers and Korean parents as well as parents and teachers of other non-native English-speaking children. (Author/HTH)

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Understanding the Relationships among American Primary-Grade Teachers and Korean Mothers: The Role of Communication and Cultural Sensitivity in the Linguistically Diverse Classroom

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Abstract

To most effectively meet the needs of young primary-grade children for whom English is not the home language, teachers must come to understand each child's family culture, how the family transmits that culture to the child, and cultural and familial expectations for the child behaviorally and academically. The best source for this information is the parents themselves. The primary goal of this study was to examine the nature of the relationship between American teachers and Korean parents, particularly in terms of effectiveness of communication and cultural sensitivity in exchanging information. Much was learned from extensive interviews with four teachers and five Korean mothers about their perceptions and concerns, best methods of communicating, and expectations about the roles of teachers and parents. From what was learned, suggestions were made to facilitate relationships between American teachers and Korean parents as well as parents and teachers of other non-native English-speaking children.

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges currently facing American teachers is how to provide appropriate care and education to classrooms of children who are increasingly diverse linguistically and culturally. It can be very difficult for teachers to communicate with and plan curriculum effectively for students who do not interpret symbols and behaviors in the same way they do. Many parents who come to the United States from other countries, especially those who do not speak English comfortably or fluently (typically, parents who have moved to the United States recently), have difficulty in communicating with their children's teachers. In addition, such students often face American teachers who do not have adequate knowledge about their cultural backgrounds, which may lead to misunderstandings, negative perceptions, and inappropriate expectations.

What follows is a story based on an event that was described in an interview conducted for this research that demonstrates how misunderstandings can arise and also how these situations can be dealt with effectively by teachers and parents who invest effort in maintaining communication with one another.

Scene #1: A Parent Meeting

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Korean Mother: Are there any concerns that you have about Youngsoo's behavior in class?

American Teacher: Well...sometimes, when I try to give Youngsoo direction, he doesn't seem to pay attention to what I am saying. As a matter of fact, he looks somewhere else and appears distracted whenever I speak to him directly.

Scene #2: Youngsoo's Home

Korean Mother: Why do you not pay attention when your teacher talks to you?

Youngsoo: Mom, I do pay attention, but you told me not to look at you straight in the eye when you scold me.

Korean Mother: So, what do you do when your teacher talks to you?

Youngsoo: I look at the floor with my head bowed down. Also, her eyes are really big and blue. I am too scared to look at her eyes.

Scene #3: The Next Day (Youngsoo's Mother Calls Teacher)

Korean Mother: I had a talk with Youngsoo yesterday. There seems to be a misunderstanding. Youngsoo tells me that he does pay attention when you talk to him. The reason why he does not look at you is because, in Korea, we teach children not to look the teacher straight in the eyes when they are being scolded.

American Teacher: Thank you for letting me knows this. It helps me understand Youngsoo so much better and makes me feel better about his reactions to me. But it brings up something that seems to be another misunderstanding. I need to let you and Youngsoo know that when I talk to students such as your son directly, even if sometimes it is about behavior, it is not usually to scold them but to suggest alternative behaviors or discuss with them better choices that they may make next time a similar situation arises.

Korean Mother: Oh, I see! Usually when a teacher speaks directly to a student in Korea, it is to scold them for misbehaving. I'll talk to Youngsoo about what you have said.

In this case, through communication with one another, the Korean mother and the American teacher were quickly able to clear up a series of misunderstandings. The teacher came to understand that Youngsoo's behavior was not meant to be disrespectful but was rather culturally explainable. The mother learned that it is common for American teachers to speak directly to individual children for a variety of reasons. Mother and teacher had an opportunity to come to better understand each other's culture-based expectations, and that understanding could, in turn, benefit the child. However, this case is probably not typical because Youngsoo's mother speaks English very well, having been an English teacher in Korea. Too often, parents from other countries and American teachers are not able to so quickly overcome their misunderstandings.

Increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse children are entering U.S. schools, and teachers in the United States are working in far more heterogeneous classrooms than ever before. The teaching force itself, however, is quite homogeneous, and there is a disparity between these teachers and the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of public school student populations (Seidl & Friend, 2002). In 2000, 85% of teachers were from the White, middle-class majority, while 33% of school-age children represented minorities and approximately 39% of teachers had students with limited English proficiency in their classrooms (Xu, 2000). Earlier data from the U.S. Department of Education (Henke, Choy, Chen, Geis, Alt, & Broughman, 1997) reflected a similar figure for the percentage of White teachers (87% in 1994), indicating that very little, if any, progress has been made in diversifying the teaching population over the past decade. The Department of Education also provided data on minority representation among

the teaching workforce in 1994: 7% African American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American. It is estimated that whereas students of color (which include a large percentage of linguistic minorities as well) will make up about 50% of the K-12 population by 2020 (Holmes Group, 1995), the U.S. teacher population will remain dominated by White teachers for whom English is their first and, typically, only language.

Although in recent years, teacher education programs have increasingly focused on better preparing their graduates to work with diverse populations of children, and numerous inservice professional development activities have centered on helping teachers understand diversity, many practicing teachers in the United States still feel uncomfortable working with minority students (Sleeter, 2001). It is critical, however, for teachers to respond to the startling changes in the composition of the student population by finding better ways to understand minority students and by developing more effective ways to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Consequently, it is important for preservice and inservice teachers to learn to communicate effectively with parents who do not interpret symbols and behaviors the same way they do, and whose perception of the role of parents in children's schooling may be quite different from the unprepared teacher's expectation. For example, many American teachers may not understand that "whereas parents are actively engaged in the home with their children's education, there is not a matching interaction between school personnel and parents" (Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 2001, p. 509). By opening themselves up to new conceptions and definitions of parent involvement as well as modes of communication, teachers and parents together can create an environment that can be powerful and transformative for language-minority students' healthy development and well-being.

Rationale for This Study

To date, too little attention has been paid to the relationships between parents who are non-native English speakers with children in American elementary schools and their children's teachers. The authors of this paper focused their efforts on examining Korean children and the relationship between their parents and teachers. This interest arose primarily from the authors' awareness of a large and growing number of Korean families living within their relatively small midwestern community and concerns about how the children and families were adjusting to the U.S. school system. The primary researcher/author is a doctoral student from Korea with extensive experience in schools and teaching in Korea, who was thus in a position to understand the perspectives of the parents, children, and, to some extent, the teachers in this study. The secondary author, a White, Anglo-American, is a teacher educator and researcher in a large university early childhood teacher preparation program (birth to third grade), has three children who have been in the public school system in the community, and was herself a teacher for several years before becoming a professor; she could thus contribute to the analysis her expertise in terms of the preparation and professional development of primary-grade teachers as well as an understanding of the culture of teachers in the American public school system.

The primary goal of this study was to examine the following question: What is the nature of the relationship between American teachers and Korean parents as seen by both the teachers and parents with respect to effectiveness of communication and cultural sensitivity? From what was learned from the interviews, practical suggestions were made to help facilitate relationships between American teachers and Korean parents as well as parents of other non-native English-speaking children.

Method

Sample

In order to study this topic, four Anglo-American primary-grade elementary school teachers who have had experiences with Korean mothers and five Korean mothers who have primary-grade children in an American public elementary school program were interviewed (see Tables 1 and 2 for data describing the

teachers and mothers more fully).

Table 1
Descriptive Data for American Teachers

	Teacher		
Subject	**Gender**	**Grade Level**	**Years Experience**
American Teacher A	Female	1st	15
American Teacher B	Male	3rd	5
American Teacher C	Female	2nd	7
American Teacher D	Female	1st	12

Table 2
Descriptive Data for Korean Mothers and Their Children

	Child		
Subject	**Gender**	**Grade Level**	**Years in the U.S.**
Korean Mother Na	Male	1st	1
Korean Mother Sa	Female	1st	1
Korean Mother Da	Female	1st	1
Korean Mother Ja	Male	2nd	1
Korean Mother Ga	Female	3rd	2

The primary researcher met with the principal of an elementary school in which many international families in her community were enrolled to discuss the research proposal and to request consent to contact primary-grade teachers in her school. The researcher targeted teachers who currently or who had in the past had Korean children in their classrooms. Once permission was granted by the principal, the researcher contacted the teachers and scheduled interviews with those teachers who agreed to participate. The Korean mothers represent a similarly convenient sample. In this case, however, the primary researcher was personally aware of several Korean mothers who had primary-grade children in the local school system within the community. The Korean mothers invited to participate received an explanatory letter about the study both in English and Korean, together with the consent form. Provisions for further clarification of the study and for answering any questions were made. None of the participants was compensated for participating in the study.

As can be calculated from the data in Table 1, at the time of the study, the four participating teachers had been teaching an average of 9 years. The five Korean mothers interviewed had been in the United States from 1 to 2 years. All of the mothers had previous experience with Korean teachers at the kindergarten or first-grade level and the educational system in Korea before moving their children to the United States.

The small midwestern city in which the study was conducted has a population of about 70,000. It has a minority population of approximately 7%. The state university in this city has about 32,000 students. There are about 1,300 Koreans in the city, about 700 of whom are students studying at the university. Many of the approximately 600 remaining Koreans in this city are family members of the students. Thus, most of the Koreans who reside in this city are sojourners who intend to return to Korea after they complete their study or work. There are, however, a few Korean Americans in this city who are more permanent residents, and these people tend to work as proprietors managing Korean groceries and Korean

restaurants, or as professors at the university. In addition, there are a few children from Korea who were adopted by Anglo-American families in the community.

Procedures

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews took place in the teachers' workplaces and mothers' homes, at times convenient for them. The primary researcher interviewed each Korean mother once for approximately 2 hours in their shared native language; extensive notes were taken in Korean and then were translated into English. The specific questions that were asked of both the teachers and the mothers are shown in Figure 1.

The Korean mothers were asked the following questions:	**The American teachers were asked the following questions:**
1. How well do American teachers understand your cultural background?	1. How well do Korean parents understand the American school system?
2. Compared to Korean teachers, what are your thoughts and feelings about American teachers?	2. Based on what you know about Korean parents, what are your thoughts and feelings about them in general?
3. What aspects of the American school system do you have a particular interest in finding out more about?	3. What method of communication is primarily used between you and your Korean parents, and how often do you communicate with your Korean parents?
4. What is your primary means of communicating with your child's American teachers?	4. What are the responses from Korean parents when you inform them of situations in which their child is misbehaving or that their child deserves commendation for good behavior?
5. Have you had any experience, good or bad, that you can relate about your relationships with the American teachers?	5. Have you had any experiences, good or bad, that you can relate about your relationships with Korean parents?
6. Do you think that it is helpful to communicate with American teachers in order for your children to adjust to and do well in American schools?	6. Do you think that it is helpful to communicate with Korean parents in order to better understand their culture and to educate their children?

Figure 1. Questions asked of the Korean mothers and American teachers in the interviews.

The interviews with American teachers were conducted by the primary researcher, one-on-one in English; were tape-recorded; and then were transcribed. Teachers were encouraged to elaborate upon their experiences and opinions and to give their own narrative accounts in response to each question. More detail or clarification was asked for whenever the situation warranted. At the beginning of the interview, the goals and procedures of the study were explained to teachers and mothers, and they signed informed consent forms.

The primary researcher coded all interview transcripts using methods of constant comparison (Merriam, 1998). The secondary researcher, a native English speaker, reviewed the coded data and aided in the interpretation. The two researchers then returned to the data and developed a more comprehensive understanding of how the data fit the two conceptual categories that addressed the primary goal of this study—effective ways of communicating and cultural sensitivity. Researchers shared the interpretive process (tentative interpretations) with research respondents as a form of member checking. Interviewees verified that researchers had reflected their perspectives and checked the accuracy of the depiction. By sharing working drafts with practicing teachers and other curriculum scholars (researchers and teacher

educators) at the researchers' university and asking them to comment on the findings, the internal validity of the findings and interpretations was enhanced.

Results

The responses to the interview questions were analyzed around the two broad themes of effective ways of communicating and cultural sensitivity. Responses from both the American teachers and the Korean mothers to the interview questions were incorporated to inform these conceptual categories. The quotations included in the presentation of these results below are representative of the sentiments and perceptions expressed by multiple respondents.

Effective Ways of Communicating

The Korean mothers and American teachers who were interviewed were primarily using phone calls, electronic mail (email), face-to-face parent-teacher meetings, and notes to communicate with each other. Korean mothers expressed general dissatisfaction with methods of communication that required understanding and speaking English, such as is required in telephoning:

> I received numerous phone calls from my child's teacher. She would usually call me to tell me that my child caused some kind of trouble at school. The general impression I received from the teacher was that she was indifferent to the needs of my son. (Korean Mother Na)

This discomfort with the language barrier was also expressed when it came to face-to-face meetings between teachers and mothers:

> Even though I meet with the teacher in person, talking in English with him/her is quite difficult and awkward. If I have to contact the teacher, I usually prefer using email. This way, I don't have to worry about pronunciation, and the communication becomes clearer. (Korean Mother Ga)

Emailing between parents and teachers was reported to be very useful by both the parents and teachers interviewed. Although many Korean parents may not speak English fluently, many can read and write English because most of them had English instruction during their own years of education in Korea and found this method a comfortable way to communicate with their children's teachers.

Roles of Teachers and Parents

Outwardly, teachers indicated that Korean parents showed nothing but great respect and admiration for them. Korean mothers interviewed said that they were brought up with the belief that teachers are the authorities in all matters related to the education of children, and that it is culturally appropriate for them to always defer to that authority. Thus, if their children's teachers confirmed information or offered opinions about academic or classroom behavior issues concerning their children, the Korean mothers reported that they typically accepted the teachers' opinions without openly questioning or voicing reservations. In fact, according to both the Korean mothers and the American teachers, Korean mothers seek frequent contact with their children's teachers and often request advice from teachers.

Korean parents are eager to know everything about how their children are doing in school and thus see it as a one of their duties as parents to work hard to maintain contact with their children's teachers. In addition, all of the Korean mothers interviewed said that they and most Korean mothers help with their children's homework and take great pains to make sure that it is completed, done well, and turned in on time. In fact, much of the communication that occurs between Korean mothers and teachers that originates from the mothers centers around their children's homework, as expressed by Teacher B:

> Korean parents are much more involved. If anything goes wrong, they want to know why, and what they can do. I found Korean parents that I have had were very upset with their children when the work was not done. (American Teacher B)

Figure 2. Helping with homework is considered an important role for Korean mothers.

It should be noted that two of the Korean mothers, Sa and Ja, had what may be an unusual perspective on the role of the teacher because they had worked in the education field in Korea. Sa and Ja indicated that they felt that they were able to communicate more effectively with American teachers than some of their Korean peers and that they were better able to apply the teachers' information to their children:

> I met my child's teacher three times since I've been here. The teacher has given me very exact and detailed information about my daughter's performance and attitudes. I was very glad that the teacher gave me precious advice about my daughter to me. (Korean Mother Sa)

> My son's teacher gave me very critical advice about my son's reading performance. It was very helpful. (Korean Mother Ja)

Cultural Sensitivity

In the interviews, when teachers were asked how they felt about the cultural differences between American and Korean children, they typically responded with some version of the phrase, "kids are kids," and indicated that what they meant by this statement is that children are basically the same all over the world. Some of the teachers indicated that they believed that any differences that they saw in Korean children were better attributed to individual rather than cultural differences, and children should not be treated any differently from one another within a group:

> As I see it, kids are kids. Korean children are not that different from American children or children from the other countries.... I think it just has to do with "boys will be boys." I don't think it has anything to do with Korean culture or the American school system. (American Teacher B)

> Although there are a lot of Korean students, we cannot treat them differently. Students from 37 countries are represented in our school, and we have to treat everyone the same. (American Teacher C)

Teachers emphasized "fairness" to all children as their approach to being culturally sensitive and felt little or no need to address the individual needs or uniqueness of each child. Although acknowledging little difference between Korean children and any of their other students, the teachers did see differences in Korean mothers, particularly in terms of their personal characteristics and specific concerns.

Characteristics of Korean Mothers

The overwhelming perception among the American teachers was that Korean parents, and Korean mothers in particular, are very involved in school life and concerned with their children's education:

> I have been teaching at this school for 15 years and have many experiences with Korean children and their parents. Korean parents are very supportive and helpful. For example, they do not miss parents' nights and parent-teacher meetings. And on international day, Korean parents eagerly volunteer. Even at the first parent meeting, Korean fathers and mothers come together to participate in it. (American Teacher A)

However, an important distinction in terms of individual and group participation became apparent from both the parent and teacher interviews. Although Korean mothers were more than willing to participate in teacher and parent meetings as individuals, they were rarely willing to speak up at such group-level activities. For instance, Korean mothers were reluctant to take active roles in school policy-making decisions:

> Individually, Korean parents are happy to volunteer, but we (Korean mothers) tend to avoid a situation where we may have to speak up to a group of American parents and teachers. Thus, no Korean mother is on the PTA board. (Korean Mother Ga)

Concerns about Academics and Language Learning

All four teachers felt strongly that the Korean parents with whom they have had experience have been, in their opinions, "overly" focused on academic achievement in general and on their children's mastery of English in particular. The Korean mothers felt, however, that a major advantage of coming to America is that their children will have the opportunity to become fluent in English by using it in everyday life while at school; only with sound academic qualifications and fluent English-language skills will their children secure the best jobs in the future. The mothers believed English-language qualifications to be a passport to a high status career, fame, respect, and a bright future:

> Almost all the parent-teacher meetings I have with Korean parents are about their child's studying. Two of my students who just came to my school are already transferring to another school. Their parents told me that they are transferring because there are too many Korean children at this school and their child's opportunity to learn English is not as great as they had expected. In this school, their child preferred talking in Korean and wanted to play with other Korean children. To me, this situation is very hard to understand. (American Teacher B)

Because, according to the Korean mothers, education is seen as an important means to success, as well as a measure of one's self-worth, education is an important and frequent topic of discussion in Korean culture.

Figure 3. When a group of Korean mothers meets, the topic of conversation often turns to education.

Another related concern that Korean mothers had, perhaps justifying their sense of urgency in having their children master English quickly, was that before their children had mastered fluent English, they felt their children might have trouble demonstrating their academic competence and thus not receive the academic instruction and challenges they needed for optimal learning:

> If the teacher had no experience with students from Korea or other countries and with how the students might demonstrate effective learning even without the use of perfect English, the teacher might tend to confuse inability to speak perfect English with the inability to learn. (Korean Mother Da)

The Korean mothers were reluctant to express such a concern to their children's teachers, however, because they feared that voicing this concern would be seen as disrespectful.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to explore the nature of the relationships between American teachers and Korean parents as seen by the teachers and parents with respect to effectiveness of communication and cultural sensitivity. To achieve this goal, extensive interviews were conducted with four elementary school teachers who had experience working with Korean students and their families and five Korean mothers who had experience as parents of children who had been students in Korea and who were now in the United States.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these interviews about this particular group of American teachers and Korean parents that may have implications for other teachers who work with Korean students and their families, as well as other linguistically different students in elementary school settings. For example, other researchers have found that Vietnamese, Japanese, Hmong, and Chinese parents, like Korean parents, have difficulty understanding the function of such well-established U.S. parent involvement programs as the PTA (Lee, 1995). Parents from these Asian countries when in their native land, do not take active roles in schools, in part because of the much higher level of respect accorded their teachers than is shown in the United States. Thus, teachers who work with families who speak languages other than English and who come from cultures with different customs and values need to make an effort to understand the mindsets that parents might bring to their educational situations.

The relationship between the American teacher and the parent from another country is highly complex and must be interactive, involving openness and understanding by each party. Whether communicating face-to-face, by telephone, or by email, the key to positive parent/teacher relationships is communication, and the key to communication among teachers and parents from other countries is cultural sensitivity. It is up to the teacher to introduce and explain the American school system and the teacher's role in the American classroom, to make parents feel valued, and to convince them that their child and children of all backgrounds deserve and will receive their full consideration. But, it also requires a willingness on the part of the parent to share information, to provide insight into the child's home culture and their own

personal views of education, and to share their major concerns. Communication must be used to foster the coming together of the teacher and parents around their mutual goal of helping the child achieve positive growth, development, and learning outcomes.

Gay (2002) suggests that teachers must understand and see each of these children as individuals and then use that information to help the child: "Teachers need to know how to use cultural scaffolding in teaching these students—that is, using their own cultures and experiences to expand their intellectual horizons and academic achievement" (p. 109). Parents become key informants in helping teachers to develop the understanding about the child's home culture necessary to do such "scaffolding" most effectively, building understanding and helping teachers determine what would be most culturally and linguistically appropriate for their children. Such collaborations can be mutually satisfying for teachers and parents but, perhaps more importantly, can lead to healthy outcomes for children who feel valued and understood. This result requires what Powell (1989) referred to as a "genuine collaboration" that unfortunately is rarely encountered in such situations but is certainly a worthy goal toward which we should work.

Conclusions from the Study

According to Lee (1995), Asian parents are reluctant to visit the school their child is attending or to attend school meetings, concluding that Asian parents rarely involve themselves directly in school affairs because Asian parents do not know how to become actively involved in their children's school activities. In this study, a different view emerged. The Korean parents, although expressing a reluctance to participate in the PTA board and other group activities, were very involved one-on-one with their children's teachers. Two reasons emerged to explain Korean mothers' reluctance to participate or at least speak out in group forums in the schools, one of which was because they lacked confidence in their ability to speak English, particularly in large-group settings. Another reason was rooted in Korean parents' deep, culturally based respect for school administrators and teachers, and their deference to authority, both of which originate in the ideals of Confucianism with which they were raised. They believe that their parental role is to listen, respect, and to follow the professional judgment of teachers and administrators. This attitude may lead to unfortunate consequences for both parties for at least two reasons: such attitudes may be misinterpreted by American teachers as a lack of caring about or willingness on the part of Korean parents to be responsible for school affairs and school policy decisions, and many concerns that Korean parents may have may remain unvoiced due to a fear of appearing disrespectful to the American teachers.

The tendency for Korean mothers to wish to contact and speak frequently with American teachers was often interpreted by the American teaches as an extreme, perhaps obsessive, emphasis on education and achievement. It did, however, as was demonstrated in the vignette related at the beginning of this paper, have the benefit that it often ultimately lead to increased understanding between the Korean parents and the American teachers. The more that parents and teachers shared information about students' school progress in casual as well as formal communications (whether face-to-face, over the telephone, or using email), the more that was learned by each of them about one another's cultural backgrounds and norms, and the more effective subsequent communication became. It seems that if teachers and Korean parents make an effort to connect through frequent communication, the likelihood of negative parental or teacher perceptions or cultural misunderstandings can be reduced.

Sleeter (2001) examines the growing body of research about helping "young White preservice students develop the awareness, insights, and skills for effective teaching in multicultural contexts" (p. 101), an area of much current interest for researchers. However, more than a decade ago, Banks (1991) asserted that to become effective multicultural teachers, teachers must have pedagogical knowledge of the characteristics of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, a goal yet to be achieved in many if not most teacher development programs. Although much of the current literature concerning multicultural education is informative, the information provided related to Asian parents and students remains abstract and continues in some cases to even reinforce stereotypes. Such information does not translate well in a useful and productive way into the concrete, real-life situations that teachers face.

One such reality that teachers must be aware of is that linguistically diverse students understand the language far sooner than they speak it fluently, and thus language itself cannot be used as an indicator of

academic ability or understanding. The inability to use English correctly is a process of adjustment and not an indication of low-level cognitive abilities (Cummins, 1986):

> My child's teacher did not appear to realize that my daughter had developed her ability to understand English much more quickly than her ability to speak English. (Korean Mother Da)

The results of this study leave the researchers optimistic in some ways, however. When asked explicitly, Korean mothers indicated that they believed that they had positive working relationships with and that they maintained effective communication with their children's American teachers. Likewise, all four teachers stated that they maintained good and steady communication with Korean mothers and that their general impression was that the Korean parents with whom they worked were respectful of teachers' professional judgment. Despite this mutual belief that communication was positive, glimpses of the inevitable cultural misunderstandings that are bound to occur were revealed in some of the stories that the teachers and the mothers shared, for instance:

> When I taught first grade, I had five Korean children. We had a Halloween party. One Korean parent brought me some roses. It was very funny because Halloween is a kind of kids' holiday. (American Teacher A)

In Korea, when parents meet teachers, they often give flowers to teachers; it is not a "funny" thing in Korea but rather a sign of respect. The teacher probably did not understand this cultural difference because giving flowers to teachers at such an occasion is not an American custom.

In addition to examples of simple misunderstandings of cultural norms and traditions that emerged occasionally in the interviews, teachers did express a few more worrisome stereotypical images of "Korean students" and "Korean mothers." For example, teachers frequently and repeatedly mentioned during the interviews sentiments such as, "Korean students are very good at math," "Korean students are all very polite and they all bow," and "All Korean parents greatly respect teachers." The teachers seemed closed to the very idea of openly acknowledging and discussing that there could be deeper cultural differences, preferring to focus, it seemed, on the similarities and shared values between themselves and the Korean mothers or parents with whom they had worked, or reducing the differences to these stereotypes and looking no further. The attitude of "kids are kids" that the teachers expressed, for instance, which on the surface may appear quite admirable, may in fact demonstrate cultural insensitivity, or an unwillingness to see what may be truly important differences, and thus hamper the possibility of coming to understand cultural differences and developing culturally responsive pedagogies. Such an attitude certainly does not lead to the cultural scaffolding promoted by Gay (2002).

Implications

Several implications emerged for teachers of children from other countries from the interviews conducted in this study. Despite the fact that this study was limited to examining Korean mothers and American teachers, many of these implications may be able to be generalized to the care and education of other linguistically diverse groups of students as well. These implications are summarized in Figure 4 and discussed in more detail below.

1. Define and research the cultural and ethnic groups represented by your students.

2. Avoid stereotyping based upon students' membership in their cultural groups.

3. Become aware of how the families transmit their cultures to their children and the cultural and familial expectations for their children both behaviorally and academically.

4. Become familiar with how the cultures represented by your students define the roles of "teacher" and "parent."

5. Identify effective communication strategies based upon the needs, skills, and comfort levels of your students' families to different communication methods, technologies, and forums.

6. Facilitate discussions among new families and those who have been in the school or country for a longer period so that new families can learn about the cultural norms and expectations in U.S. schools.

Figure 4. Summary of suggestions for facilitating the understanding between American teachers and linguistically diverse students.

One of the more critical things for teachers to remember when working with linguistically and culturally diverse students is to *carefully and specifically define the population that they want to know about.* For instance, even in research literature, most of the data about Korean students are aggregated into the one single category of "Asians." It is important to note that in the Asian population, as in other ethnic groups, significant differences exist based upon multiple sociocultural variables, including country of origin, religious beliefs, generational status, language usage, and social class. So it is important, for instance, to know and come to understand what it might mean if a child is Japanese, Korean, or Taiwanese, rather than just finding out what it means to be "Asian" or what it might mean if a child is German, Dutch, or Italian rather than considering them simply "European." Recognizing these group differences is crucial for teachers who have language-minority students in their classes.

A word of caution must accompany this first recommendation, however. While recognizing group differences, it is important for teachers to *avoid assigning characteristics to individual children in their classrooms that may be based upon stereotyped images of their particular cultural group.* Stereotyping exists when inaccurate characteristics of a group are ascribed to a single individual (Bennett, 1990). As such, we need to be aware of more accurate generalizations about groups. Teachers who have linguistically and culturally different students in their classes should learn enough about each their students' cultures to make accurate generalizations in order to reduce unnecessary misunder ings but at the same time exercise caution about over-applying these broad generalizations to indivi children and their families.

For teachers to be most effective, they must *become aware of their students' families' cultures, how the families transmit their cultures to their children, and the cultural and familial expectations for their children behaviorally and academically.* The only effective way to get this type of information is from their students' parents. Teachers can organize both formal and informal parent-teacher meetings with the specific agenda of discussing cultural issues and concerns that may or may not be related to culture. It is through such meetings that parents and teachers can determine whether students' behavior is culturally explainable, come to understand each other's culturally based expectations, and discuss and negotiate mutually satisfactory goals for academics and behavior. Through such meetings, teachers become critical socializing agents for parents, and teachers learn the valuable resource provided by the parents who offer insights about their students.

Compared with U.S. teachers, Korean teachers hold a much more important social position in society, and thus parents show great respect for them. In such a context, teachers have the authority to make decisions for students' academic development. They inform students' parents about decisions and seek parental support. In America, however, American parents typically take a more active role in their children's educational decisions. In order to develop an effective partnership between American teachers and mothers of children from other countries and cultures, both teachers and parents need to *become familiar with how the cultures represented by their students define the roles of "teacher" and "parent."*

A critical key to making discussions effective between teachers and parents of linguistically different children is for teachers to *identify and then implement the communication strategies that are most effective for the family.* Teachers should pay careful attention to the needs, skills, and comfort level of their students' families to different communication methods, technologies, and forums. Although a fairly

new trend, email emerged as a popular method of communicating for the Korean mothers and American teachers in this study, a method that may prove to be highly effective for facilitating at least some contact between teachers and parents who are non-native English speakers. Although email may be an effective tool in helping overcome some communication difficulties, because many non-native English speakers read and write English with more confidence than they speak it, it was clear from the interviews that email should not replace all face-to-face or personal contact between parents and teachers. Both teachers and parents indicated that they still appreciated and felt a need for personal, human contact with one another, even if it was only in informal situations.

Finally, parents and students who are non-native English speakers, especially those who are new to this country, need to be sensitive to American culture. Most of the Korean mothers interviewed mentioned that it would be helpful to them if other Koreans in the community would have seminars or meetings for the newer Korean parents and students. *Facilitate discussions among new families from one culture or country and those who have been in the school or country for a longer period so that new families can learn about the cultural norms and expectations in U.S. schools.* In such meetings, those who have experienced the American school system could explain their experiences and understanding and give practical advice.

Conclusion

Teachers can no longer rely on either their own cultural background or their limited experiences with people who are different from them to know how to effectively teach and reach the diverse students represented in their classes. The level of understanding required does not come from reading stereotyped accounts of other peoples and other lands or from taking a tourist approach to understanding other cultures:

> Well...there are six Korean students in my class, but I have not researched the culture, history, or educational system of Korea. But we do have international day at our school, so I do know a little about Korea. (American Teacher D)

Although "international days" and other snapshot approaches to learning about other cultures may help us broaden our understanding of cultural differences and worldwide perspectives somewhat, the most important information about students' individual natures and cultural backgrounds can best be obtained from students' parents. It is only through talking with our students' parents, both formally and informally, finding ways to work around or break down barriers to communication and being truly sensitive to other's cultures, and to facilitate understanding and cultural sensitivity that we can truly learn to provide the care and education that meets the needs of all of the individual children and families with whom we work.

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